

“Help, Praying”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

CHOIR: “Help!”¹

“I need somebody.”

CHOIR: “Help!”

“Not just anybody.”

CHOIR: “Help!”

“You know I need someone.”

CHOIR: “Help!”

“When I was younger, so much younger than today,

“I never needed anybody’s help in any way.

“But now those days are gone, I’m not so self-assured.

“Now I find I’ve changed my mind, I’ve opened up the doors.”

“Help me if you can I’m feeling down,

“And I do appreciate ya bein’ round.

“Help me get my feet back on the ground.

“Won’t you please, please, help me?”

I wonder who’s lost track of how many ways to pray for help we’ve run through already in this service. Look at your Orders of Service and count them with me. The Chalice Lighting can be seen as a prayer: “May its flame kindle within us” is seeking a blessing. The first hymn is definitely a prayer: it may go unspoken but we hope someone/thing will “Guide my feet.” The Covenant says that “Service is our prayer,” and I always assert that simply attending worship—whether one is in the room or joining us online—is offering a service to the community, so that’s the third one. The Responsive

¹ Lennon, John, and Paul McCartney. Lyrics from the song, “Help” from album “Help”, 1965.

Reading offers a prayer in dialogue: a speaker expresses doubts and needs, and a response is offered; one can read this as humanist, Taoist or spiritual; it encourages faith in “the way.”

I’ll say more soon about our verbal/physical/musical meditation, but it can be seen as a prayer; we’re up to five now. The song of response is clearly a prayer; our reading claimed itself to be a prayer, and the second hymn is undoubtedly one: how clearer can one pray for help than by asking for comfort. And then there’s the Beatles, perhaps more famous than Jesus at that time, but still seeking help. We’re at nine different prayers and about six *kinds of prayer*.² I admit that not all of them suggest that the source of help could be divine, but that’s great for us; we can say the same words without using them in exactly the same way. Some of these are for people who never pray, or for those who don’t realize they might be. Only the hymns are close to the traditional form that some of us love and some despise.

Let’s talk further about the traditional form of prayer, by which I mean saying words out loud or silently; addressed at least theoretically to some entity that listens; seeking either specific or generic assistance; ending with a promise, praise or gratitude... and then, most importantly, maintaining some sense of openness to a vague, clear, or real response. Here’s a personal example.

I’ve been a Twelve Step recovery person for more than 30 years, but when I’m only nine months sober, I’m in a crisis of faith, trust, confidence, what have you. I feel like I’ve put so much into recovery and I should be feeling, thinking and living much better; I’m still deeply dissatisfied. Feel free to snicker because what in heaven’s name do I know just nine months clean and sober, right? But this is where I am. I’m terrified that this is all there is; this is the best it can get. I was brought up praying, and embraced the practice in my young adulthood, so I get on my knees by my bed and pray, not so much in words, but by directing all this turmoil towards my Higher Power with a plea in my whole being for help. Then I hear the still small voice.

“Remember where you were last year.”

Six little ordinary words; Dear Abby could have written them, but they come in a teeny, tiny, crystal-bell-like voice from the deepest part of me that’s connected like a filament with the centre of all things. I didn’t know there was such a thing or place in me, but I come to know it for sure at this moment. I *hear* this and *feel* this. And instantly calm and peace replace my inner tumult. It’s as if a drop of light is put into an ocean of black oil and instantly turns it all into liquid diamond: an immediate change of attitude, hope and resolve. I wish this would happen every time I pray, but it doesn’t. Often, I get by on the *memory* that it happened and the acceptance afterward that I know next to nothing about what’s coming in my life, but I have knowledge that, as Edwin Muir writes, “The way leads on.”³

Now, why would that happen to me? To *me*? There’s a long, well-thought out theological position some might take about that; boiled down, it says there’s no reason why; but there’s no reason why not, either. That’s pretty unsatisfying. Further, why do some of us UUs experience prayer meaningfully and find it helps, while others don’t believe, never try and, if perhaps they do try at some dark early solitary morning hour in pain, they get no result. I haven’t a clue. But I do have a thought,

² After the service a congregant pointed out that lighting the candles at Joys and Concerns is also a form of prayer; she was right!

³ #670 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. The Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993.

not a reason, but something worth our thinking about. You might think that I'm suggesting this is a reason, but I'm not. I am suggesting that each of us think about this: Pride.

Getting Catholic for a moment, I mean the Mortal Sin of Pride. Not self-worth, or personal dignity, or stiff-upper-lipped-ness. Actually, I think Pride is one of the most common Sins of virtually all religious people, including the social justice faithful, religious humanists and New Atheists. I mean Pride in the sense of being certain that I am right. I know everything I need to; I have all that I need; I bow to no one. Now, many religious people do indeed bow to the prophet or divinity of their understanding, but they do that with certainty that they *know* the right prophet, or the right method of bowing to the exclusion of all others.

If there's one thing that I feel, I guess I better say *pretty* certain about praying for help, it's that we need to be aware, even respectful, even reverent of not knowing what we're doing. Either not knowing just what it is that's listening or even whether anything is; or if the channel is open right now; or if there'll be an answer; or what form it might come in. Neither assuming nor precluding anything. Allowing our pride to be washed away in a humble state of supplication, acknowledging our human frailty, imperfection and uncertainty. And continuing neither to assume nor preclude as our way leads on.

An answer may appear clearly; the need for one may disappear; down the line, looking back, we might see a hidden answer not perceived while it was coming about. We may discover how we are distorting or preventing an answer from emerging. We might realize we are asking for the wrong help. Or that it's within us and not outside. It might come from human hands and seem trivial for that. And, yes, sometimes the answer is no, or, "Take a number and sit in the waiting room." My number was in the five figures so I left to get back on the way. I've received all of these answers over time.

Coming back to the meditation we tried earlier in the service, I see that as a form of prayer for a few reasons. First, the science: neurological studies have as yet not found a difference between how the brain functions during meditation from how it does during prayer, except that in the latter, verbal structures in the brain are also activated. So if you meditate saying a mantra, your brain is praying. Or if you pray without words, your brain is meditating. Some of us put much emphasis on being open to meditating but not to praying; the brain apart from our frontal lobe doesn't seem to care. And what's meditation about anyway if it isn't getting the frontal lobe to shut up.

Second, whether we pray or meditate, we can only do it in the present moment so an exercise that brings our attention fully into the present, even into our bodies, is a solid beginning to either activity. For those of us who see the divine as within every aspect of creation, then saying, "I am here" is both a personal and theological fact. For those who don't perceive the divine, it's the most fundamental statement of our being that there is.

Finally, you might have noticed that, as you said a word with a particular gesture, it felt different from saying the same word with another gesture. You may have found that sometimes your overall focus of attention shifted from the personal to the spiritual as you went through the different pairings. I think developing the capacity to notice such shifts during meditation helps us be prepared to notice such shifts as we go through life, potentially opening us to a state in which we neither assume nor preclude new awareness.

To finish, let's consider the famous, much-loved and extremely flexible Serenity Prayer; let's look at it in three different versions. The original is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, an American theologian active in the middle 20th Century. As a Christian, he writes in this form:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
 the things that cannot be changed,
 Courage to change the things
 which should be changed,
 and the Wisdom to distinguish
 the one from the other.
 Living one day at a time,
 Enjoying one moment at a time,
 Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
 Taking, as Jesus did,
 This sinful world as it is,
 Not as I would have it,
 Trusting that You will make all things right,
 If I surrender to Your will,
 So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
 And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
 Amen.⁴

In 1941 or '42, Jack, an AA member in New York City, sees a short version in the newspaper and shows it to other alcoholics.⁵ Quickly it becomes one of the most common elements of virtually every 12 Step meeting around the world:

"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
 courage to change the things we can,
 and wisdom to know the difference."

Many in these meetings simply leave out the first word, God, so it becomes part prayer, part affirmation.

Many years ago, needing a fuller form but with a theology that speaks to me, I adapted Niebuhr in this way:

God, grant me the serenity
 to accept the things I cannot change,
 the courage to change the things I can,
 and the wisdom to know the difference.
 Living one day at a time;
 Enjoying one moment at a time;

⁴ http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity_prayer/ Accessed 19.03.08.

⁵ <http://www.aahistory.com/prayer.html> Accessed 19.03.08.

Accepting hardship as the path to peace;
Taking, as you do, this imperfect world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that all things will become right as I align myself with your universe:
That I may be reasonably happy today and increasingly happy as I go on.

You can find your way of praying; your way of seeking help. You can define the source of help that's meaningful to you. I encourage you to do so, and hope that we will continue to encourage each other. All that I think is necessary is that we keep an open mind; neither assuming nor precluding; maintaining a space within which *your* universe might respond in a way that you can perceive.

May it be so.

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